

It's About the Questions Ronald R. Bearwald

Effective coaching thrives not on quick fixes and ready answers, but on questioning and listening.

Working with colleagues, superiors, and subordinates, educators are exposed to both good and bad practices. These accidental influences, however, lack the powerful and lasting influence, depth, and focus of a structured coaching partnership.

A coaching relationship isn't about providing a quick fix or a recipe for success. Rather, the most powerful relationships focus on reflecting, exploring, analyzing, and digging deeper into good practice. In the coaching process, we hope to change reflections into insights, expand knowledge into wisdom, and evoke changes in behavior that improve performance.



Michelangelo once noted that a statue resides inside every block of marble, and it was his challenge to find it. Similarly, it is the coach's role to find the effective educator and leader inside every mentee.

The Core of Coaching

As work together begins, the coach must promote a mutual commitment to several core understandings. But whatever ground rules and frameworks are established, focused dialogue is the key to finding the effective educator within the mentee. As Senge has written, effective coaching is not about the answers; it's about the questions (Senge et al., 1999).

Mentees are often looking for answers, and coaches are primed to oblige. But offering answers to every question can lead to a dysfunctional dance that short-circuits higher-level thinking. Unless the mentor is committed to questioning and listening, collaborative work often remains mundane. When a mentor provides a solution or makes a decision for the mentee, the mentor unwittingly inhibits the reflection needed to identify desirable courses of action. When the mentee asks, "How can I develop a master schedule?," the mentor should let questions such as "What essential information will you need?" and "What are the steps in your process?" and "Whom should you consult?" lead the way.

Questions to Ask

The most meaningful mentoring moments are based on carefully designed questions (Maxwell, 2008). So how can a coach ensure that his or her questions are effective?

Ask questions about essential issues and behavior.

Effective education involves planning, data analysis, assessment, decision making, instructional leadership, and professional development. Questions that explore these themes, instead of day-to-day minutiae, give you insights into how your mentee is evolving. Questions such as, "In what ways did your planning succeed or fail?" or "What

were some of your specific contributions to its success or failure?" will provide insights into your mentee's thinking and progress.

It's understandable that coaching conversations may gravitate toward tasks, projects, and deadlines. However, it is important to continue to work on identified core issues. Any discussion of a job-related detail should serve as a springboard to such global themes as planning, assessing, communicating, collaborating, and following through. Addressing problems and tasks in the context of these core issues helps your mentee develop the skills necessary to identify effective strategies and action plans. For example, sharing information is a daily workplace requirement. When a mentee asks, "How should I report the changes in our schedule?" questions such as, "What are the goals of your communication?" and "How will you get feedback on the changes?" will guide the mentee toward a broader and more useful perspective.

Ask precise and incisive questions.

Questions that prompt probing and higher-level thinking will help you and your mentee identify issues that need to be addressed. The more precise the question, the greater the resulting clarity. "Do you feel that you are part of the team?" is a far less useful inquiry than, "In what specific ways are you contributing to the team's success?" Precise questions lead to clarity that enables the mentee to identify and own the problem and develop a specific action plan.

Typically, the experienced coach understands the big picture, whereas the mentee often remains focused on a particular situation or circumstance. By posing incisive questions, the coach can help identify salient issues that are not apparent to the mentee. For example, carefully crafted inquiries can help a mentee who expresses frustration about not having a voice in making decisions to recognize that the real issues revolve around better communication or more trusting relationships. Questions such as, "In which specific situations do you feel that you are not being heard?" and "What do others expect of you in these settings?" hold promise for pinpointing the real issue.

Ask questions that generate specific and relevant information.

When your mentee raises concerns, pose questions that lead to more in-depth examination. When a mentee exclaims, "I feel isolated!" you can help him or her explore professional relationships and communication by asking, "When do you feel most isolated?" or "What opportunities do you have to communicate with colleagues?" or "Who are some of the colleagues with whom you have a positive relationship you can build on?"

Avoid asking questions that can be answered with *yes* and *no* or similar one-word responses. *Yes* and *no* are dialogue dead ends. Rather than asking, "Do you think the staff respects you?" try asking, "What are some of the specific qualities for which the staff respects you?" Don't confuse thought-provoking, open-ended questions with generalized questions that stifle meaningful reflection. Asking the mentee, "What do you want to talk about?" or "How are things going?" rarely provides useful data.

Ask questions that connect the past, present, and future.

Coaching is about growth and development. Throughout the partnership, keep ongoing themes alive by recalling past discussions. Starting where you left off in your last session, as well as refocusing on previously addressed issues and themes, helps your mentee uncover how to apply previously successful approaches to current situations and to refine those approaches.

Along the same lines, you serve your mentees well when you lead them to understand how they can use a specific solution or strategy in the future. For example, one of the keys to improved productivity and performance is building systematic approaches to ongoing and repeating tasks. Asking "How can you use the experience of working with colleagues on this project to streamline future endeavors of a similar nature?" guides mentees to examine successful practices and pitfalls and to create a systematic approach to future challenges.

Ask questions that explore values.

Presumably, mentees have qualifications, knowledge, skills, and competence that provide the basis for their current assignment. Although you need to determine what they know and suggest improvements, learning what's in their heart is also essential. Asking questions that explore what they believe and what they value helps move the focus from the head to the heart. Asking mentees to explore and articulate their values and beliefs will help you understand how they behave in various situations.

When, for example, a mentee complains about not being heard, this provides an opportunity to examine underlying values and beliefs. Asking the mentee, "What is your view of collaboration?" or "In what specific ways would you like to contribute more?" can provide essential clarity on which to build. Evoking meaning from the mentee's own beliefs is essential to mentoring (Shenkman, 2008).

Occasionally, ask for permission.

When interacting with a mentee over time, it's important not to take things for granted as the partnership develops into a comfortable and sharing relationship. Take care of the process and the dynamic by checking in with questions that ask permission and check boundaries, such as "Would you like some feedback on what you just shared?" or "Are you comfortable continuing this analysis?" Questions of this nature help maintain a foundation of mutual respect.

Avoid asking why.

It's wise to avoid asking why when conversing with the mentee. Even if you are seeking nothing more than broader understanding or a rationale for behavior, asking why implies that you have already made judgments about the mentee's actions, which may put him or her on the defensive.

Coaches should develop skill in posing questions that elicit explanations without asking why. "Can you tell me more about the thinking process that led to your decision?" and "Help me understand your decision" are more likely to generate useful responses than

bluntly asking, "Why did you do that?"

The Value of Questions

Effective coaches remember the symbiotic relationship between questioning and listening. As we craft more probing questions, we find that listening improves. The more intentional our questions become, the more intentional our listening becomes. When we focus on asking well-designed and purposeful questions and listening carefully to the answers, we send mentees the message that they already have what they need to be successful (Rock, 2006). Good questions elevate the importance of self-reflection, higher-level thinking, dialogue, and building on people's strengths (Hunter, 2004).

Whereas Socrates used questions in his dialectic method to promote higher awareness, contemporary coaching must be more than an intellectual exercise. Today's mentors must rely on well-crafted questions to generate the data and insights so pivotal to the ongoing growth of the mentee during the coaching process. Developing a question-driven methodology will provide a richer, more relevant, and more meaningful mentoring partnership.

Coaches need to resist being seduced by the quick fix while ignoring explorations that encourage improvement. Remembering that coaching is not about the answers, but about the questions will serve both the coach and the mentee well as their partnership unfolds.

The Ground Rules

- The best coaching partnerships are voluntary. Even in instances of assigned coaching, both the coach and the mentee must see value in a mutually beneficial working relationship that resides outside performance evaluation.
- Information shared within the coaching partnership should remain confidential unless both parties agree to share with others outside that relationship.
- Each participant, coach and mentee, is responsible to complete any work that both have deemed beneficial.
- Coaching activities should seek to expand professional knowledge, develop skills, and explore best practices by promoting examination of the mentee's competencies and experience as well as the school culture.
- Coaching partnerships should promote growth, not mastery. We are all "works in progress," and the focus of coaching must be on overall progress, not on the minutiae of day-to-day activities.
- A coaching partnership focuses on the practical, not the abstract. Although education theories may be helpful, the coaching partnership should emphasize issues and goals arising from the immediate school culture.

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October 2011 | Volume **69** | Number **2**
Coaching: The New Leadership Skill Pages 74-77